

## **Overview of the Montana Trust Land Management Division and Whitefish Area Plan**

### **Mission**

The goal of the Trust Land Management Division (TMLD) of the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) is to: Manage the State of Montana's Trust Land resources to produce revenues for the Trust beneficiaries while considering environmental factors and protecting the future income-generating capacity of the land. This mission is supported by state law (77-1-601, MCA) which states: "It is in the best interest and to the great advantage of the state of Montana to seek the highest development of state-owned lands in order that they might be placed to their highest and best use and thereby derive greater revenue for the support of the common schools, the university system, and other institutions benefiting therefrom, and that in so doing the economy of the local community as well as the state is benefited as a result of the impact of such development". Further, 77-1-203, MCA provides that state lands "are utilized in that combination best meeting the needs of the people and the beneficiaries of the trust".

### **Purpose of the Whitefish Area Plan**

The purpose of the plan is to provide a basis for determining land use opportunities on school Trust lands and to link that information and policy direction to local planning documents. The plan will provide a framework within which land use proposals may be reviewed and evaluated. It will also provide an opportunity for the local community to become informed of and involved in the planning process and, in turn, for DNRC to establish its role as a stakeholder in local land use planning decisions. Timber production is currently the primary land use for these Trust Lands and it is within this context that this planning process will occur.

*Bringing the needs of the beneficiaries and the needs of the surrounding community together in a strategic plan for use of the Montana Trust Lands in the Whitefish area is at the heart of the Whitefish Area Plan. It is imperative that the local community provides the critical input that will help guide this process.*

### **What the plan will not do**

*The Whitefish Area Plan will not specifically trigger any development project, land sale or land acquisition. No land use proposals are currently being considered by the Department and no new uses will be specifically permitted when the plan is adopted. All proposed new land uses will be subject to the procedures established through the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) and will under go an Environmental Analysis (EA), and if necessary, an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be prepared. Further, all proposed new land uses will be subject to local subdivision review and zoning regulations.*

### **Need for the Whitefish Area Plan**

Revenue from trust lands is derived in two ways: 1) interest earned from the permanent trust fund, and 2) trust land use fees or product receipts. Statewide trust land revenue grew at an average annual rate of 3% between 1993 and 2001. However, revenues produced through interest earnings and fees for traditional uses of these state lands, such as timbering and agricultural grazing rights has not kept pace with the needs of the beneficiaries. To help insure that adequate services are provided to Montanans now and in the future, a land use strategy that will lead to greater revenue generation is called for.

Trust Lands within the greater Whitefish area have historically been dedicated to timber and agricultural uses, while surrounding community's demographics and economy have changed.

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Considering alternative and complementary uses regarding how these lands may be better managed in a way that will serve the surrounding community as well as increase beneficiary revenue is the challenge set before us.

### **History of the Land Trust and Beneficiaries**

By the Enabling Act approved in 1889, the Congress of the United States granted the State of Montana, for common school support, sections sixteen and thirty-six in every township within the state. Where lands were pre-disposed before passage of the Enabling legislation, other lands were selected. Subsequent acts also granted acreage for other educational and state institutions in addition to the common schools. These additional state institutions include the University of Montana, Montana State University, Montana Tech of the University of Montana, Western Montana College, Eastern Montana College, the School for the Deaf and Blind, the school at Pine Hills, the Veterans Home, and Public Buildings.

### **The Trust Land Management Division**

The purpose of the Trust Land Management Division is to administer and manage the state Trust timber, surface, and mineral resources for the benefit of the common schools and other endowed institutions in Montana. The department's obligation is to obtain the greatest benefit for the school Trusts. The greatest monetary return must be weighed against the long-term productivity of the land to ensure continued future returns. All users, including other state and federal agencies must pay license fees (for short term use) or lease fees (for long term use), as well as royalties as appropriate for use of state land for any purpose including recreation.

The division is divided into four programs including agriculture and grazing management, forest management, mineral management, and special use management. The special uses management division is involved with a number of diverse activities including commercial and industrial developments; wind farms; home sites; resorts; recreational licenses; land sales, transfers, and exchanges; and providing rights-of-ways, reciprocal access, conservation and other easements.

The lands associated with the Whitefish Area Plan are predominately managed for timber. In addition some of the Trust lands are leased for grazing and relating agricultural uses. There are also some recreational uses.

### **Financial Overview of the Trust Land Management Program**

Currently the revenues generated by State Trust lands and the permanent Trust return approximately \$45 million to the general funds of Montana's public schools (kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade) or about 10 % of their budgets. In addition those lands held for the state university system provide \$2.5 million dollars annually to Montana State University, the University of Montana, Montana Tech, Western Montana College and Eastern Montana College.)